

THREE ESSAYS
By Augustine Birrell

Victoria R. J.

COLLECTION
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THREE ESSAYS:
Book-buying, Book-binding, and
The Office of Literature



Three Essays:

I. BOOK-BUYING // II. BOOK-BINDING
III. THE OFFICE OF LITERATURE

BY
AUGUSTINE BIRRELL



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I · BOOK-BUYING

Three Essays:

BOOK-BUYING • BOOK-BINDING • AND
THE OFFICE OF LITERATURE

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I • BOOK-BUYING

THE Most distinguished of living Englishmen who, great as he is in many directions, is perhaps inherently more a man of letters than anything else, has been overheard mournfully to declare that there were more booksellers' shops in his native town sixty years ago, when he was a boy in it, than are to-day to be found within its boundaries. And yet the place 'all unabashed' now boasts its bookless self a city!

Mr. Gladstone was, of course, referring to second-hand bookshops. Neither he nor any other sensible man puts himself out about new books. When a new book is published, read an old one, was the advice of a sound though surly critic. It is one of the boasts of letters to have glorified the term 'second-hand,' which other crafts have 'soiled to all ignoble use.' But why it has been able to do this is obvious. All the best books are necessarily 'second-hand.' The writers of to-day need not grumble. Let them 'bide a wee.' If their books are worth anything, they, too, one day will be second-hand. If their books are not worth anything there are

ancient trades still in full operation amongst us—the pastrycooks and the trunkmakers—who must have paper.

But is there any substance in the plaint that nobody now buys books, meaning thereby second-hand books? The late Mark Pattison, who had 16,000 volumes, and whose lightest word has therefore weight, once stated that he had been informed, and verily believed, that there were men of his own University of Oxford who, being in uncontrolled possession of annual incomes of not less than £500, thought they were doing the thing handsomely if they expended £50 a year upon their libraries. But we are not bound to believe this unless we like. There was a touch of morosity about the late Rector of Lincoln which led him to take gloomy views of men, particularly Oxford men.

No doubt arguments *à priori* may readily be found to support the contention that the habit of book-buying is on the decline. I confess to knowing one or two men, not Oxford men either, but Cambridge men [and the passion of Cambridge for literature is a by-word], who, on the plea of being pressed with business, or because they were going to a funeral, have passed a bookshop in a strange town without so much as stepping inside, just to see whether the fellow had 'anything.' But painful as facts of this sort necessarily are, any damaging inference we might feel disposed to draw from them is dispelled by a comparison of price-lists. Compare a bookseller's catalogue of 1862 with one of the present year, and your pessimism is washed away by the tears which unrestrainedly flow as you see what bonnes fortunes you have lost. A young book-buyer might well turn out up-

on Primrose Hill and bemoan his youth, after comparing old catalogues with new.

Nothing but American competition, grumble some old staggers.

Well! why not? This new battle for the books is a free fight, not a private one, and Columbia has 'joined in.' Lower prices are not to be looked for. The book-buyer of 1900 will be glad to buy at to-day's prices. I take pleasure in thinking he will not be able to do so. Good finds grow scarcer and scarcer. True it is that but a few short weeks ago I picked up [such is the happy phrase, most apt to describe what was indeed a 'street casualty'] a copy of the original edition of *Endymion* [Keats' poem—O subscriber to Mudie's!—not Lord Beaconsfield's novel] for the easy equivalent of half-a-crown—but then that was one of my lucky days. The enormous increase of booksellers' catalogues and their wide circulation amongst the trade has already produced a hateful uniformity of prices. Go where you will it is all the same to the odd sixpence. Time was when you could map out the country for yourself with some hopefulness of plunder. There were districts where the Elizabethan dramatists were but slenderly protected. A raid into the 'bonnie North Countrie' sent you home again cheered with chap-books and weighted with old pamphlets of curious interests; whilst the West of England seldom failed to yield a crop of novels. I remember getting a complete set of the Brontë books in the original issues at Torquay, I may say, for nothing. Those days are over. Your country bookseller is, in fact, more likely, such tales does he hear of London auctions,

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buying

and such catalogues does he receive by every post, to exaggerate the value of his wares than to part with them pleasantly, and as a country bookseller should, 'just to clear my shelves, you know, and give me a bit of room.' The only compensation for this is the catalogues themselves. You get them, at least, for nothing, and it cannot be denied that they make mighty pretty reading.

These high prices tell their own tale, and force upon us the conviction that there never were so many private libraries in the course of growth as there are to-day.

Libraries are not made; they grow. Your first two thousand volumes present no difficulty, and cost astonishingly little money. Given £400 and five years, and an ordinary man can in the ordinary course, without undue haste or putting any pressure upon his taste, surround himself with this number of books, all in his own language, and thenceforward have at least one place in the world in which it is possible to be happy. But pride is still out of the question. To be proud of having two thousand books would be absurd. You might as well be proud of having two top-coats. After your first two thousand difficulty begins, but until you have ten thousand volumes the less you say about your library the better. Then you may begin to speak.

It is no doubt a pleasant thing to have a library left you. The present writer will disclaim no such legacy, but hereby undertakes to accept it, however dusty. But good as it is to inherit a library, it is better to collect one. Each volume then, however lightly a stranger's eye may roam from shelf to shelf, has its own individuality, a history of its own. You

remember where you got it, and how much you gave for it; and your word may safely be taken for the first of these facts, but not for the second.

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The man who has a library of his own collection is able to contemplate himself objectively, and is justified in believing in his own existence. No other man but he would have made precisely such a combination as his. Had he been in any single respect different from what he is, his library, as it exists, never would have existed. Therefore, surely he may exclaim, as in the gloaming he contemplates the backs of his loved ones, 'They are mine, and I am theirs.'

But the eternal note of sadness will find its way even through the keyhole of a library. You turn some familiar page, of Shakespeare it may be, and his 'infinite variety,' his 'multitudinous mind,' suggests some new thought, and as you are wondering over it you think of Lycidas, your friend, and promise yourself the pleasure of having his opinion of your discovery the very next time when by the fire you two 'help waste a sullen day.' Or it is, perhaps, some quainter, tenderer fancy that engages your solitary attention, something in Sir Philip Sidney or Henry Vaughan, and then you turn to look for Phyllis, ever the best interpreter of love, human or divine. Alas! the printed page grows hazy beneath a filmy eye as you suddenly remember that Lycidas is dead—'dead ere his prime'—and that the pale cheek of Phyllis will never again be relumined by the white light of her pure enthusiasm. And then you fall to thinking of the inevitable, and perhaps, in your present mood, not unwelcome hour, when the 'ancient peace' of your old friends will

Book- buying be disturbed, when rude hands will dislodge them from their accustomed nooks and break up their goodly company.

‘Death bursts amongst them like a shell,
And strews them over half the town.’

They will form new combinations, lighten other men’s toil, and soothe another’s sorrow. Fool that I was to call anything mine!

II • BOOK-BINDING

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THERE is a familiar anecdote of the ingenious author of 'The Seasons,' 'Rule, Britannia,' and other excellent pieces, that when he sent a well-bound copy of his poems to his father, who had always regarded him, not altogether unjustly, as a 'feckless loon,' that canny Scot handled the volume with unfeigned delight, and believing that his son had bound it, cried out admiringly, 'Who could have thought our Jamie could have done the like of this?' This particular copy has not been preserved, and it is therefore impossible for us to determine how far its bibliopægic merits justified the rapture of the elder Thomson, whose standard is not likely to have been a high one. Indeed, despite his rusticity, he was probably a better judge of poetry than of binding.

This noble craft has revived in our midst. Twenty years ago, in ordinary circles, the book-binder was a miscreant who, by the aid of a sharp knife, a hideous assortment of calf-skins and of marbled papers, bound your books for you by slaughtering their margins, stripping their sides, and returning them upon your hands cropped and in prison garb, and so lettered as to tell no man what they were. And the worst of it was we received them with complacency, gave them harbourage upon our shelves, and only grumbled that the price was so high as four shillings a volume. Those days are over. Yet it is well to be occasionally reminded of the rock from whence we were hewn, and the pit out of which we were digged. I have now lying before me a first edition of the essays of Elia which, being in boards, I allowed to be

treated by a provincial called Shimmin, in the sixties. I remember its coming home, and how I thought it was all right. Infancy was no excuse for such ignorance.

The second-hand booksellers, a race of men for whom I have the greatest respect, are to blame in this matter. They did not play the part they might have been expected to do. They gave no prominence in their catalogues, which are the true text-books of literature, to specimens of book-binding, nor did they instil into the minds of their young customers the rudiments of taste. Worse than this, some of the second-hand booksellers in the country were themselves binders, and, for the most part, infamous ones.

One did, indeed, sometimes hear of Roger Payne and of the Harleian style, but dimly, and as a thing of no moment, nor were our eyes ever regaled in booksellers' catalogues with facsimiles of the exquisite bindings of the French and English masters. Nor was it until we went further afield, and became acquainted with the booksellers of Paris, that this new world swam into our ken. It was a great day when a stray copy of a 'Bulletin Mensuel' of Damascene Morgand, the famous bookseller in the Passage des Panoramas, fell into the hands of a mere country book-buyer. Then he knew how brutally he had been deceived—then he looked with loathing on his truncated tomes and their abominable devices. The first really bound book I ever saw was a copy of the works of Pierre de Ronsard bearing the devices of Marguerite de Valois. The price was so far beyond my resources that I left the shop without a touch of envy, but the scales had fallen from my eyes, and I walked down the Pas-

sage des Panoramas as one who had awakened from a dream. Book-
binding

Nowadays it is quite different. The Arts and Crafts Exhibition did much, and the second-hand booksellers, in quite ordinary places, are beginning to give in their catalogues reproductions of noble specimens. Nothing else is required. To see is enough. There was recently, as most people know, a wonderful exhibition of bindings to be seen at the Burlington Fine Art Club, but what is not so generally known is that the Club has published a magnificent catalogue of the contents of that Exhibition, with no less than 114 plates reproducing with the greatest possible skill and delicacy some of the finest specimens. Mr. Gordon Duff, who is credited with a profounder knowledge of pigskins than any living man, has contributed a short preface to the volume, whilst Miss Prideaux, herself a binder of great merit, has written a general introduction, in which she traces the history of the craft, and duly records the names of the most famous binders of Europe. A more fascinating picture-book cannot be imagined, for to the charm of colour and design is added all the feeling which only a book can impart. Such a book as this marks an epoch, and ought to be the beginning of a time when even sale-catalogues shall take pains to be splendid.

When the library of the Baron de Lacarelle came to be dispersed at his death a few years ago, the auctioneer's catalogue, as issued by Charles Porquet, of the Quai Voltaire, made a volume which, wherever it goes, imparts dignity to human endeavour, and consecrates a virtuoso's whim. It was but a small library—only 540 books—and to call it well

Book-binding selected would be to abuse a term one has learnt to connect with Major Ponto's library in 'The Book of Snobs.' 'My library's small,' says Ponto, with the most amazing impudence, 'but well selected, my boy, well selected. I have been reading the History of England all the morning.' He could not have done this in the Baron's library.

As you turn the pages of this glorified catalogue, his treasures seem to lie before you—you can almost stroke them. A devoted friend, de la Société des Bibliophiles français, contributes an ecstatic sketch of the Baron's character, and tells us of him how he employed in his hunt after a book infinite artifice, and called to his aid all the resources of learned strategy—'poussant ses approches et manœuvrant, autour de la place, avec la prudence et le génie d'un tacticien consommé, si bien que le malheureux libraire, enlacé, fasciné, hypnotisé par ce grand charmeur, finissait presque toujours par capituler et se rendre.' This great man only believed in one modern binder: Trautz. The others did not exist for him. 'Cherchez-vous à le convertir? Il restait incorruptible et répétait invariablement, avec cet esprit charmant, mais un peu railleur, dont il avait le privilège, que s'il était jamais damné, son enfer serait de remuer une reliure de Capé ou de Lortic!'

It is all very splendid and costly and grand, yet still from time to time,

'From the soul's subterranean depth upborne,' there comes the thought of Charles Lamb amidst 'the ragged veterans' he loved so well, and then in an instant a reaction sets in, and we almost hate this sumptuous Baron.

‘Thomson’s “Seasons” again, looks best [I maintain it] a Book-binding little torn and dog’s-eared. How beautiful to a genuine lover of reading are the sullied leaves and worn-out appearance, nay, the very odour [beyond Russia], if we would not forget kind feelings in fastidiousness, of an old “circulating library” “Tom Jones” or the “Vicar of Wakefield”! Thus far, Elia.

Let us admit that the highest and noblest joys are those which are in widest commonalty spread, and that accordingly the clay pipe of the artisan is more truly emotional than the most marvellous meerschaum to be seen in the shop-windows of Vienna—still, the collector has his joys and his uses, his triumphant moments, his hours of depression, and, if only he publishes a catalogue, may be pronounced in small type a benefactor of the human race.

III · THE OFFICE OF LITERATURE

III · THE OFFICE OF LITERATURE

DR. JOHN BROWN'S pleasant story has become well known, of the countryman who, being asked to account for the gravity of his dog, replied, 'Oh, sir! life is full of sairiousness to him—he can just never get eneugh o' fechtin''. Something of the spirit of this saddened dog seems lately to have entered into the very people who ought to be freest from it—our men of letters. They are all very serious and very quarrelsome. To some of them it is dangerous even to allude. Many are wedded to a theory or period, and are the most uxorious of husbands—ever ready to resent an affront to their lady. This devotion makes them very grave, and possibly very happy after a pedantic fashion. One remembers what Hazlitt, who was neither happy nor pedantic, has said about pedantry:

'The power of attaching an interest to the most trifling or painful pursuits is one of the greatest happinesses of our nature. The common soldier mounts the breach with joy, the miser deliberately starves himself to death, the mathematician sets about extracting the cube-root with a feeling of enthusiasm, and the lawyer sheds tears of delight over Coke upon Lyttleton. He who is not in some measure a pedant, though he may be a wise, cannot be a very happy man.'

Possibly not; but then we are surely not content that our authors should be pedants in order that they may be happy and devoted. As one of the great class for whose sole use and behalf literature exists—the class of readers—I protest

The Office of Literature that it is to me a matter of indifference whether an author is happy or not. I want him to make me happy. That is his office. Let him discharge it.

I recognise in this connection the corresponding truth of what Sydney Smith makes his Peter Plymley say about the private virtues of Mr. Perceval, the Prime Minister:

'You spend a great deal of ink about the character of the present Prime Minister. Grant all that you write—I say, I fear that you will ruin Ireland, and pursue a line of policy destructive to the true interests of his country; and then you tell me that he is faithful to Mrs. Perceval, and kind to the Master Percevals. I should prefer that he whipped his boys and saved his country.'

We should never confuse functions or apply wrong tests. What can books do for us? Dr. Johnson, the least pedantic of men, put the whole matter into a nutshell [a cocoanut shell, if you will—Heaven forbid that I should seek to compress the great Doctor within any narrower limits than my metaphor requires!], when he wrote that a book should teach us either to enjoy life or endure it. 'Give us enjoyment!' 'Teach us endurance!' Hearken to the ceaseless demand and the perpetual prayer of an ever unsatisfied and always suffering humanity!

How is a book to answer the ceaseless demand?

Self-forgetfulness is of the essence of enjoyment, and the author who would confer pleasure must possess the art, or know the trick, of destroying for the time the reader's own personality. Undoubtedly the easiest way of doing this is by the creation of a host of rival personalities—

hence the number and the popularity of novels. Whenever a novelist fails his book is said to flag; that is, the reader suddenly [as in skating] comes bump down upon his own personality, and curses the unskilful author. No lack of characters and continual motion is the easiest recipe for a novel, which, like a beggar, should always be kept 'moving on.' Nobody knew this better than Fielding, whose novels, like most good ones, are full of inns.

When those who are addicted to what is called 'improving reading' inquire of you petulantly why you cannot find change of company and scene in books of travel, you should answer cautiously that when books of travel are full of inns, atmosphere, and motion, they are as good as any novel; nor is there any reason in the nature of things why they should not always be so, though experience proves the contrary.

The truth or falsehood of a book is immaterial. George Borrow's *Bible in Spain* is, I suppose, true; though now that I come to think of it, in what is to me a new light, one remembers that it contains some odd things. But was not Borrow the accredited agent of the British & Foreign Bible Society? Did he not travel [& he had a free hand] at their charges? Was he not befriended by our Minister at Madrid, Mr. Villiers, subsequently Earl of Clarendon in the peerage of England? It must be true; and yet at this moment I would as lief read a chapter of the *Bible in Spain* as I would *Gil Blas*: nay, I positively would give the preference to *Don Jorge*.

Nobody can sit down to read Borrow's book without as completely forgetting himself as if he were a boy in the forest with Gurth and Wamba.

The
Office of
Litera-
ture

Borrow is provoking, and has his full share of faults, and, though the owner of a style, is capable of excruciating offences. His habitual use of the odious word 'individual' as a noun-substantive [seven times in three pages of *The Romany Rye*] elicits the frequent groan, and he is certainly once guilty of calling fish the 'finny tribe.' He believed himself animated by an intense hatred of the Church of Rome, and disfigures many of his pages by Lawrence-Boythorn-like tirades against that institution; but no Catholic of sense need on this account deny himself the pleasure of reading Borrow, whose one dominating passion was camaraderie, and who hob-a-nobbed in the friendliest spirit with priest and gipsy in a fashion as far beyond praise as it is beyond description by any pen other than his own. Hail to thee, George Borrow! Cervantes himself, *Gil Blas*, do not more effectually carry their readers into the land of the Cid than does this miraculous agent of the Bible Society, by favour of whose pleasantness we can, any hour of the week, enter Villafranca by night, or ride into Galicia on an Andalusian stallion [which proved to be a foolish thing to do], without costing anybody a peseta, and at no risk whatever to our necks—be they long or short.

Cooks, warriors, and authors must be judged by the effects they produce: toothsome dishes, glorious victories, pleasant books—these are our demands. We have nothing to do with ingredients, tactics, or methods. We have no desire to be admitted into the kitchen, the council, or the study. The cook may clean her saucepans how she pleases—the warrior place his men as he likes—the author handle

his material or weave his plot as best he can—when the dish is served we only ask, Is it good? when the battle has been fought, Who won? when the book comes out, Does it read?

Authors ought not to be above being reminded that it is their first duty to write agreeably—some very disagreeable men have succeeded in doing so, and there is therefore no need for anyone to despair. Every author, be he grave or gay, should try to make his book as ingratiating as possible. Reading is not a duty, and has consequently no business to be made disagreeable. Nobody is under any obligation to read any other man's book.

Literature exists to please—to lighten the burden of men's lives; to make them for a short while forget their sorrows and their sins, their silenced hearths, their disappointed hopes, their grim futures—and those men of letters are the best loved who have best performed literature's truest office. Their name is happily legion, and I will conclude these disjointed remarks by quoting from one of them, as honest a parson as ever took tithe or voted for the Tory candidate, the Rev. George Crabbe. Hear him in *The Frank Courtship*:

“I must be loved,” said Sybil; “I must see
The man in terrors, who aspires to me:
At my forbidding frown his heart must ache,
His tongue must falter, and his frame must shake;
And if I grant him at my feet to kneel,
What trembling fearful pleasure must he feel:
Nay, such the raptures that my smiles inspire,

That reason's self must for a time retire."
"Alas! my good Josiah," said the dame,
"These wicked thoughts would fill his soul with shame;
He kneel and tremble at a thing of dust!
He cannot, child:"—the child replied, "He must."

Were an office to be opened for the insurance of literary reputations, no critic at all likely to be in the society's service would refuse the life of a poet who could write like Crabbe. Cardinal Newman, Mr. Leslie Stephen, Mr. Swinburne, are not always of the same way of thinking, but all three hold the one true faith about Crabbe.

But even were Crabbe now left unread, which is very far from being the case, his would be an enviable fame—for he was not one of the favourite poets of Walter Scott, and whenever the closing scene of the great magician's life is read in the pages of Lockhart, must not Crabbe's name be brought upon the reader's quivering lip?

To soothe the sorrow of the soothers of sorrow, to bring tears to the eyes and smiles to the cheeks of the lords of human smiles and tears, is no mean ministry, and it is Crabbe's.

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